

Directness in Russia's High-Context Culture

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Introduction

When Edward Hall first introduced the concept of high- and low-context cultures in *Beyond Culture* (1976), in the same work he identified high-context cultures with indirectness and, conversely, low-context cultures with directness. These two dichotomies have since been treated as equivalent: if a culture values directness and explicit communication, the thinking goes, it is a low-context culture, and if explicit communication is deprecated in a culture, it is high-context. However, the equivalence begins to break down when applied to high-context cultures other than Japanese culture, which Hall used as his example. Russian culture, a high-context culture by Hall's definition, allows for greater directness in communication than American culture, which is Hall's first example for a low-context culture. A closer investigation of this pattern shows that instead of undermining Hall's concept of context, this pattern provides further evidence for the validity of his model.

High-Context Cultures

A high-context culture, according to Hall, is one in which individual interactions between its members are typically high-context (HC) transactions, meaning that they tend to encode less meaning in the linguistic code and rely more on the receiver's prior knowledge. Such transactions "feature preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message" (101). When communication is made up of HC transactions, it has the potential to be faster and more efficient; however, Hall warns,

“time must be devoted to programming,” otherwise the act of communication will fail, since part of the message is missing.

The “programming” that Hall refers to is encoded in the culture as a whole: people who live and operate within the culture know that they are likely to be expected to fill out the meaning of any given message with prior knowledge and that the sender of the message is unlikely to provide an explanation or explication, which Hall calls “contexting.” Furthermore, not only does a high-context culture condition its members to expect HC transactions, it also provides the prior knowledge necessary to decode the messages. Children growing up in the culture will learn the additional information—be “programmed,” as Hall puts it—by the time they reach adulthood, while an outsider, even one who knows to expect coded communication, has to expend significant effort to reach the same level of “programming.”

Russian Culture as a High-Context Culture

Russian culture fits the criteria above for a high-context culture, particularly in its written texts. Unexplained and uncited references to literature and other culture-specific works are common, even expected, in Russian writing. Take the following passage from Maria Semyonova’s *Мы – славяне!* [We Are Slavs!], an easy-to-read, but thorough resource on the culture of ancient Slavs: “It’s not accidental that the old man Khottabych pulled hairs out of his beard – without that the magic wouldn’t work. Nor is Chernomor’s amazing beard an accident in Pushkin’s fairy tale...” (93). The relevance of this passage to the section on beards, in which it appears, is apparent, but the references are cryptic. Who is Khottabych? Or Chernomor? The reader has to supply the answers, as neither of these names has appeared anywhere else in the section, or even the book.

Similar use of references is even more common in Russian newspapers and magazines. One article in the local St. Petersburg magazine *Fontanka* includes the following opaque section titles: «А если не будут брать, отключим газ» (“And if they don’t take it, we’ll shut off the gas” – from the film *The Diamond Arm*), «Где эта улица, где этот дом?» (“Where is that street, where is that house?” – a line from a Soviet-era song), and «Избушка, избушка, повернись к кадастру передом, к жильцам задом» (a parody of a line common in Russian fairy tales). In the same vein, the last section features an entire paragraph that was lifted, uncited, from Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov’s novel *The Golden Calf*, which readers were supposed to recognize only by the reference to the main character, Ostap [Bender].

One could argue that both of these text types, whatever their overall purpose, are also meant to entertain, which is why cultural references are used to break up the monotony of a strictly informative communication of facts. However, the same tendency—to omit key information and rely on the reader’s prior knowledge—is observed in texts not at all intended for entertainment, such as recipes and manuals. A recipe in a Russian cookbook, such as Svetlana Lagutina’s *Быстрая кулинария* [Quick Cuisine], is typically an unbroken paragraph, arranged in mostly chronological order, using impersonal infinitives where English would use imperatives. The narrative is not separated into logical steps, and is likely to end with the frustratingly vague instruction жарить/варить до готовности, ‘fry/boil until done.’ Ingredients lists are optional, and numerous recipes are simply marked with «пропорции продуктов произвольные», meaning that it is up to the reader what amounts to use. In fact, such instructions are only vague to the English reader, someone accustomed to a list of ingredients and enumerated, detailed steps. In Russian culture it is acceptable to assume that the reader will know how to fill in the gaps,

what proportions to use, and what “until done” looks like, and if they do not, the implication is that perhaps they should not be cooking.

All of these examples of written communication have a second purpose in addition to the primary one: informing or entertaining the receiver. The use of references and assumptions about the audience indicates that the two sides in this communicative act are treating each other as part of the same group and the same culture. If the receiver fails to recognize the references, or is unable to follow the recipe instructions due to insufficient information, not only does the communicative act fail, the entire experience signals to the receiver that they are an outsider and have not lived up to the expectations of the culture. The nature of these interactions matches Hall’s description of HC transactions, and their dominance in Russian culture defines it as a high-context culture.

High-Context Cultures and Indirectness

Thus, Russians fulfill Hall’s characterization of people in high-context systems: they “expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems” (113). Hall goes on to make the following claim about the linguistic expression of high-context culture:

When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what’s bothering him, so that he doesn’t have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly—this keystone—is the role of his interlocutor. To do this for him is an insult and a violation of his individuality. (113)

This statement is the reason why high-context cultures have been identified with indirectness by default. While the statement may be true for the Japanese culture that Hall used

as his reference, it is not always true for Russian culture, particularly in the spoken language. Russians tend to be more direct in such speech acts as requests, commands, invitations, and complaints. In fact, using circuitous formulas in such contexts may be perceived as manipulative, sarcastic, or even insulting.

Directness in Russian Pragmatics

Tatyana Larina's *Категория вежливости и стиль коммуникации* [The Category of Politeness and Style of Communication] provides ample examples of directness in Russian speech, particularly as compared to British English. Larina performs a quantitative study and comparative analysis of a variety of speech acts, including requests, invitations, advice, directives, greetings, compliments, and expressions of gratitude. Her data show that English speakers prefer indirect forms, including in the most intimate of settings: "Can you move your arm?" "Can I have another glass of wine?" "Do you think you could just go and see if she's all right?" The opposite is true of Russian speakers: such phrases "will be interpreted [by them] as inappropriate, excessively formal for the given situations" (3.8). In similar situations, Russians will default to a simple imperative, usually softened by "please" or a diminutive form of address. The same phrases would be «Убери, пожалуйста, руку» ("Please move your arm"); «Налей, пожалуйста, ещё вина» ("Please pour more wine"); «Сходи посмотри, всё ли с ней в порядке» ("Go look if everything is all right with her"). According to Larina, these differences in linguistic expression are typical of Russian communication as a whole.

Larina also notes that approaching strangers on the street and using direct styles of address with them is typical for Russians, but the same would sound unacceptably rude in a similar situation in an English-speaking country. For example, a Russian could address a stranger on the street with *Скажите, пожалуйста, как пройти к метро* – literally, "Please tell me

how to get to the metro.” (3.5.1.1) The English equivalent requires a softening “could you...” or other indirect formula, despite carrying the same meaning and achieving the same communicative objective.

Communicative Space

Larina explains these distinctions between Russian and English communicative strategies by an asymmetry in the respective cultures’ communicative space (2.2). English speakers extend politeness and potential communication even to people who are socially distant from them, while making fewer distinctions between how they speak in positions of authority and how they speak with equals. Russians, on the other hand, typically make no effort to be polite to strangers and will even avoid eye contact on the street.

However, the greatest difference is in how Russian and English speakers address the people closest to them, as in the examples above. In relationships with the shortest social distance (zone “Z-prime”), English speakers maintain a certain distance, which Larina calls the “zone of personal autonomy.” This distance, Larina says, is what English speakers mean when they talk about privacy. “Privacy,” she writes, “which is the most important value of English culture, defines the boundary that separates interlocutors, which you cannot cross even with the best of intentions (such as when inviting or treating someone); it sets the limit to which you can approach and up to which you can exert a communicative influence on the addressee” (2.2). This injunction against exerting direct influence on an addressee explains the English preference for indirect strategies, even when in reality the addressee has no choice but to fulfill a request or concede to a demand.

In Russian culture, a short social distance has the opposite effect. As Larina points out, “in Russian communication, Z-prime is the zone of intimacy, which is the most important

cultural value for Russians. When in this zone of relationships, Russians demonstrate a special warmth and heartiness not found in English culture, but at the same time they do not particularly concern themselves with formulas of etiquette, which seem excessive among close friends, not to mention insufficiently respectful of the interlocutor's independence" (2.2). The key difference is that where an English speaker respects another's independence by not imposing demands, a Russian speaker respects it by being sincere and stating their requests, demands, and complaints directly.

Finally, with strangers on the street, as demonstrated in Larina's examples, Russians may not reach the same level of sincerity and warmth as they do with their friends, but all the same they will address strangers more directly, lacking the intentional distancing that is common in English culture. The avoidance of distancing is, in turn, explained by less social distance overall, as well as the strong distinction made in Russian culture between *svoi* [one's own] and *chuzhie* [outsiders]. *Chuzhie* are the people on the street with whom a Russian has no business, and with whom they will not attempt to make contact. Larina's examples of how Russians communicate with passers-by imply that as soon as a Russian has reason to interact with a stranger, that stranger is then in the *svoi* category, albeit temporarily.

Individualism and Collectivism

The distinction between *svoi-chuzhie* and closer average social distance, Larina notes, is typical of collectivist cultures. For historical reasons, Russian culture is more collectivist, whereas English culture (meaning both American and British cultures) is more individualist: it values personal space and independence, thereby giving precedence to the one over the many. Individualist culture also values equality and tolerance. In terms of communicative culture, the individualist insistence on personal autonomy leads to the demonstrated social distance and the

tendency to avoid direct demands; combined with the value of tolerance it means that a member of an individualist society will not typically assume that their interlocutor shares their culture.

Everyone belongs to the *chuzhie* category, and there are no *svoi*.

Collectivism and Shared Culture

Given all the above does the directness of Russian culture invalidate Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context cultures? Larina does, in fact, make reference to Hall's work and concepts, and identifies Russian culture's challenge to his characterization of high-context cultures. As she puts it, "the subsequent conclusion that a direct style of communication is characteristic of high-context, individualist cultures, while an indirect style is characteristic of low-context, collectivist ones, requires, as shall be shown, some qualification" (1.2.4) She does not, however, elaborate on the exact nature of this "qualification," even though the solution can be found in her own examples and descriptions.

In fact, the way Larina describes collectivism echoes Hall's observations of high-context cultures. He writes: "High-context cultures make greater distinctions between insiders and outsiders than low-context cultures do" (113), i.e. the Russian distinction between *svoi* and *chuzhie*. More generally, the collectivist mindset is itself a reflection of Hall's concept of a high-context culture. Its characteristics include valuing the group over the individual, giving more weight to the opinions of others in the group, and respecting elders and other hierarchies. Thus, the collectivist approach focuses on what is shared between members of a group, thereby giving the greatest weight to adhering to an established culture and allowing for a shared culture to be assumed. For high-context cultures in general and Russian culture in particular, in-group status is key because it provides the context necessary for communication: only *svoi* can appropriately

decode the context-dependent HC interactions, and as a consequence, communication is typically not even attempted with anyone outside that category.

Qualifying Hall's Concept of Indirectness in High-Context Cultures

As was shown earlier, the directness observed in Russian communicative culture can be explained by a closer social distance and, ultimately, by the value placed on shared knowledge and values. Despite the fact that Russians state their demands and complaints directly, Hall's assertion that in high-context culture it is the role of the interlocutor to "place the keystone" still applies to the way Russians communicate. The keystone that needs to be placed is not what the speaker wants, but why the speaker has the right to place demands on the listener. That right stems from values held by the culture as a whole: openness, sincerity, and mutual assistance, assumed to be shared by everyone within the group. These values are the context that the interlocutor must access in order to accept the message and react appropriately.

The examples of indirectness described above, seen primarily in written communication, are one method to establish that the parties to the communication are within the same group and to enforce the understanding that being well-versed in the shared elements of the culture is crucial to operating within the community. Once the value of being within the group is established, the effect of the high-context culture reverses, requiring more direct communication to avoid alienating the addressee and appearing to treat them as an outsider. These are the qualifications and additional nuances that Larina's work shows to be necessary in Hall's concept of high-context cultures.

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